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Propaganda

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Islam, since its beginning, always remained a proselytizing religion, and even now has not entirely lost such tendencies. The speed with which it spread over large countries was unparalleled in history. Such countries were either those peopled with nations of a Semitic stock, or those which for long periods of history remained under strong Semitic influence, as in the case of Persia. In countries with a different intellectual outlook, however, as in Europe, India and China, Islam had very little success, and only centuries of domination permitted it to make some headway in Southern India.

There were probably two main causes which impeded its success, apart from the profound difference of mentality. One was the remarkable absence of organisation in preaching. For the most part it depended on private initiative, whether peaceful, or violent, when religious purpose served as a cloak for plain predatory escapades. The legend of the victorious Islam offering conquered peoples the choice between conversion or death belongs to fairy tales and historical hyperbolism. The main weapon of the conquerors was in fact economic pressure and taxation policy, but even in this, as is well-known, such pressure was not exercised in an organised way. Contrary to this, there were any number of instances in history in which, for fiscal reasons, the central Muslim government artificially impeded the process, or at any rate discouraged it. It is really remarkable that while war for religious cause *(jihad)* was prescribed as a religious duty of every able bodied member of the Islamic community, nothing was ever said of the propaganda of its ideas. The only branch of Islam in which the preaching of religion, *dawat* , was not only organised, but even considered of special importance, was Ismailism. It must be noted, however, that the Ismaili *dawat* , though religious in form, was mainly political in substance. Its aim was to unify the world of Islam in the recognition of the principle of Alid theocracy which was expected to secure not only religious, but also social and political advantages. Such propaganda could obviously thrive under the influence of two factors, - the positive in the form of religious zeal and enthusiasm of the preachers, and the negative, the hard conditions of the masses, economic distress, bad administration and acute discontent with the established order.

The impediment which belonged to the inner nature of the preaching of Islam was connected with its conservatism of forms. When the preaching started amongst the heathen Arabs, it was easy indeed to demand that they would learn the new forms of worship and accept the new scriptures in the Arabic language. Perhaps it was not so difficult in the case of the Semitic peoples who lived in close touch with the Arab. But for those who had nothing in common with all this, such necessity constituted a serious obstacle both for the acquisition of the necessary familiarity with the religion, and for the final act of conversion. In fact, conversion to Islam demanded that the new convert should not only become a Muslim, but also at least partially an Arab. He had to switch his religious life to the new ideas expressed in a difficult foreign language, adopt foreign standards, ideals, and so forth. This, of course, was quite possible for individuals, but presented an almost unsurmountable obstacle to the masses in a different social system, as in the caste organisation in India. Here, with the individual being nothing without his caste connections, the only method that could work was mass conversion not of individuals, but of whole castes. This simple idea was probably never realized, and it is for this reason that not only the preaching of orthodox Islam met with less success than in other countries, but that many reformatory movements, such as those started by Akbar Dara Shikuh, and others, failed miserably.

Either by intuition or sound and clever reasoning Nizari Ismaili missionaries devised some methods which helped them to overcome such local obstacles. Such methods depended on two principles. One was their bold tactics in separating the meaning and spirit of Islam from its hard Arabic shell. The other was their concentration of effort on a few definite castes, or those strata of the depressed classes in which the caste hold was weaker than in higher ones. They explained the high ideals of Islam in the familiar terms

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of the ancestral religion and culture of the new converts, Hinduism, striving to make of them good *'m'umins'* , sincere adepts of the spirit of Islam, rather than *Muslims* , i.e. those who formally profess Islam, often without paying attention to its Spirit and implications.

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Mass conversion substantially differs in nature from individual cases. Tradition usually preserves the stories how a saint worked a miracle which, by its super-naturality, at once convinced either one or many unbelievers, and these gave up all their objections, and instantly became sincere and devout followers of the 'truer' religion, as preached by the saint this is how such cases should appear in iconography and hagiology. More authentic and non-standardised historical or autobiographical stories depict quite a different process of long internal struggle. The supernatural element merely plays the part of an accelerating factor, shedding the remaining doubts of the intended convert for whom the new religion has long since presented a great attraction.

Nothing is so silly as the oft-repeated imaginary methods of conversion attributed to Fatimid *dai's* who are depicted as gradually insinuating themselves upon persons of the most sincere faith, gradually inspiring doubts, and ultimately shaking their religious convictions, so seducing them into atheism and impiety. How many thousands of such' extraordinarily clever, tactful and learned missionaries would be required to convert a Berber tribe, or the inhabitants of one Persian or Indian village? How long would it take, and of what use would be a crowd of atheists and hooligans in the promotion of a purely religions movement ?

Surely, the conversion of masses, just as every phenomenon of social life, is rarely a question of personal initiative or even personal conviction. It entails a thorough change in the outlook of the community concerned, and religious considerations , however inspiring and attractive, rarely outweigh economical, political, and other practical motives. We shall probably never know much about the development of the process, but if it is a historical fact that certain strata of the population of Sind were converted to Satpanth, we cannot disbelieve the circumstance that, in addition to religiouus attraction, the conversion was expected to bring with it certain practical advantages.

We have seen how great a part was played by Messianic expectations in the spread and history of the Ismaili movement in the more Western countries. So it was in India, even long after they were almost entirely given up in the original community. They constituted the "bridge" between Ismailism and Hinduism which permitted the new ideas to enter that entirely different world of Hindu mentality. It was the effort to make Islam recognized as the religion of the final period, Kaljug, according to Hindu terminology, promised in ancient prophecies. Ali bin Talib, the first Imam, was introduced as the expected Tenth avatar of the Deity. The Coran had to be the last Ved, cancelling and abrogating the former scriptures, but, on the whole, continuing the same tradition of the periodical Divine revelation. Ali b Abi Talib, however, was not the legendary religious hero who came upon the historical stage, performed his miracles, and disappeared. He was, so to speak, "continued" in his successor-Imams, the manifestations of the same Divine Substance.1 The Imam, mysteriously residing in a very remote place in the West, was, of course, for the ordinary inhabitant of Sind, little more than an abstraction. The habitual outlook of the ordinary man brought up in the ideas of Hinduism could thus more easily approach the higher message of Islam and adopt a new and more advanced mentality.

As is well known, Islam itself from its inception favoured historico-philosophic theories depicting the Divine Revelation as one single process. It started with the first man, Adam, who was at the same time the first great prophet, the Apostle of God. With the progress of humanity each successive Apostle brought a more perfect system of humanity the Divine law and beliefs. In addition to these Apostles of God, great prophets who at different times were sent to all the nations of the world. 2 In medieval India, in circles inclined to a compromise with the local ideas and conditions, a theory was commonly favoured according to which those whom the Hindus regarded as their gods or great saints were, in fact, some of those ancient prophets of God sent to their country.

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The Ismaili missionaries were thus in line with the orthodox in this respect. They brought the matter a step further by proclaiming Islam the crowning phase of the whole development of Hinduism. According to them, the Coran (together with the *tawil* system) was the last and final Ved, completing, abrogating and superseding the earlier revelation. In this, theory Hinduism was merely a preparatory phase, just as Christianity, Judaism, etc., in the revelation of the only True Religion, Satpanth.

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Thus, from a purely Islamic view point, the method of bridging the difference between Islam and Hinduism adopted by Ismaili missionaries was perfectly correct, in no way conflicting with orthodox ideas. The question might only arise concerning certain important details. The original Islam, including early Ismailism, emphasises that the Prophet and the Imams, though chosen by God for such an all-important mission, were, nevertheless, ordinary mortal men, differing from others by their superior intellects only. This superior intellect at later times became more and more divinized, and under the influence of various philosophical and mystical theories became a kind of Divine Light, consubstantial to the Divine creative act symbolised by the Coranic (or Biblical) story of God's uttering the word "be", and so forth. Being Divine, this substance manifested in the Prophet and the Imams, was thus imperishable and eternal, and the theory was developed that it always remains in one particular line of the first Imam's descendants, supernaturally transferred from the father to the son. Still further development of the theory produced its extension upon the past. An uninterrupted line of the Imams must not only be in existence now, and in the future, but also must have been in existence ever since the creation of the world, and even before it. In the top-most abstract forces, such as the Creative Will and Intelligence of the Deity, there cannot be any division, or partition. Therefore it would be no exaggeration or perversion of the truth to state that the same force which constitutes Imamate was responsible for the creation of the Universe, and thus that the first Imam, Ali b. Abi Talib, and after him the Imams in general, were identical with the Creator 3. Thus, logically enough, in the terms of the Hindu theogony, 'Ali is the continuation of the line of Avatars., i.e. visible manifestations of the Deity, the Creator.

This idea, stripped of both Islamic and Hinduistic theological associations and details, may be too simplified, but it shows, I hope, with sufficient clarity the process by which such apparently incompatible outlooks as Muslim and Hindu could be synthesized and combined into one religious theory. It would be natural to expect, from the Islamic point of view, that the highest place would belong to the Prophet himself, not the Imam. But in this there is no internal contradiction. We may realize that Shi'ism and the cult of the Imams was probably due to the incidental circumstance that the Prophet had left no male posterity. Islam and its culture are synthetic products of immense complexity. The comparatively few leading religious ideas recognized as genuine and legitimate by the theologians never existed or else they developed in a kind of a vacuum. In reality they thrived and at every moment were in one way or another influenced by the milieu of the earlier beliefs ideas, superstitions, customs, and so forth. Many of these as is well-known, possessed great driving force, although continuously opposed by the consensus of the purists. Amongst such unorthodox ideas we know many, and can identify their origin, while there probably still remain many which elude identification.

In the instance of the Nizari post-Alamût theories, and also certain features of popular Persian Sufism, we can easily identify a group of ideas, forms of worship and beliefs which are plainly alien to the orthodox Islamic theories. It is not easy in the present state of our knowledge, however, to see where we should trace the source from which they were derived. We find numerous parallels in such widely differing ethnic, linguistic and social groups as the sects of Ali-Ilahi of Kurdistan, Nusayris of Syria, and Tantric cults, more particularly those of the worshippers of Shakti in India, in addition to avowedly mobile and wandering darwish organizations. It looks as if there is, after all, a mysterious connection between all these.4 The Tantric cults are believed to be the remnants of the ancient, pre-Aryan religion of India, gradually submerged, modified and partly re-modeled by orthodox Hinduism, the religion of the invaders. It is usually supposed that the pre-Iranian population of Persia largely consisted of the peoples of Dravidian stock remnants of which are still preserved in the Brahui tribe of Baluchistan.

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It is true, as there are many references in the works of Muhammadan authors, that already in historical times, there was a big influx of the people called Zutt, apparently of Dravidian stock, from Makran. They settled at many places in Mesopotamia as far North as Khâniqîn, and were always remarkable for the strong Shi 'ite sentiment which they developed ever since their conversion to Islam. This however, may have an explanation of economical and social character. Besides it is neither possible to see what these Zutts really were racially, nor whether they played any part in the development of Ali-Ilahi ideas.

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Persian darwishes show remarkably strong ties with similar organisations in India, chiefly in Sind, and it is quite possible that certain ideas could have been imported through such channels. It appears, however, that such importations would have been made at an early date.

All this in a complex combination probably produced the common ground on which the propaganda of the *Pir's* could develop. We know nothing, as was mentioned above, about the developments under the regime of the early Ismaili *dais* and their proselytizing work amongst the Hindus. The late Nizari propaganda judging from its nature and the meager information we can sift out of legendary tradition, developed at a late date, obviously the Timurid period. At that time Islam was "in the air'" all over Sind ; its principles and chief ideas were probably familiar to a very wide strata of purely Hindu population. The *Pirs* , obviously had no need to break virgin soil, and their main problem was probably to find some means of rendering the process of transition from Hindu to Islam, especially in the case of various discontented elements in the Hindu society, as easy and smooth as possible. This problem they have solved with remarkable tact and intuition, with very limited means at their disposal welding two cultures into one, and laying the foundation to to new cultural group which in itself bore the seeds of further great progress and potentialities. From the point of view of the customary standards and methods of Islamic propaganda their methods may at first sight appear strange and even questionable. But a closer study reveals sound logic and genuine enthusiasm on their part. "Dis-Arabicized" (if such a term is permissible) Islam is nevertheless Islam, and if its ideas do not conform with the highest standards of Muslim theology, it is because the milieu among whom it spread were illiterate masses, entirely alien to the cultural out look in which Islam originally developed and grew up. Illiterate masses even after a long association with Islam, as is well-known could preserve and even develop new beliefs often of a very questionable orthodoxy.

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